



# DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

## INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

For Release MONDAY, AUGUST 19, 1940

### GREAT WHITE HERONS INCREASING ON WILDLIFE REFUGES IN FLORIDA

The great white heron, majestic bird of Florida that was almost wiped out in the 1910's by hunters who sold its plumes to milliners, is well on its way to successful recovery, officials of the Fish and Wildlife Service reported today to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes. According to a recent estimate there are about 1,000 of these birds on the Great White Heron and Key West National Wildlife Refuges on the Florida Keys. Others may be found on other keys in the Gulf of Mexico.

Established in 1938 as a sanctuary for these comparatively rare birds, the Great White Heron Refuge consists of a number of keys and islands lying along the Gulf of Mexico side of the main Florida Keys. The 2,000-acre refuge was established primarily to preserve the great white heron but, with its adjacent sister sanctuary, the Key West National Wildlife Refuge, it also protects other forms of wildlife, including many species of herons, the man-o'-war-bird, eastern brown pelican, snowy egret, white-crowned pigeon, turkey vulture, southern bald eagle, laughing gull, and terns.

The original decrease in the great white heron population is attributed not only to market hunters but to commercial fishermen who in the early 1900's gathered the young for food. It is said that at one time the species was reduced to an estimated 100 pairs. The species almost became extinct again in 1935 when a hurricane reduced the population to less than 150.

When it became apparent a few years ago that the great white heron was rapidly approaching extinction, officials of the Fish and Wildlife Service selected the keys and islands of the present refuge as a sanctuary for these birds because it was on these mangrove-studded islands that the herons nested.

Most of the keys are low-lying and their bases are covered with water at high tide, while a few are higher and dryer and have coarse sandy beaches. Exactly how many islands are within the refuge boundary is not known. Many of the keys have not been surveyed and some are not even shown on maps. The refuge manager, however, estimates that there are some 1,000 keys in the area.

The great white heron is an unusual bird in the United States. The largest of the American herons, it occupies the most restricted range of any of its tribe and one of the most restricted bird ranges in the United States. Its present range in the United States is said to be from extreme southern Florida, near Cape Romano, south to the Keys and west to the Marquesas group and east to Card Sound. The entire normal range lies within one county, Monroe, and is some 130 miles long and 10 to 30 miles wide. The bird is also found in Cuba, Jamaica, and Yucatan.

Discovered by the Naturalist-artist Audubon in 1835, the great white heron has since been locally named the great white crane and the white crane. Its scientific name, Ardea occidentalis, means a heron of the west.

The great white heron is a conspicuous bird in its native haunts, its huge white body standing out against the green background of the mangroves in which it lives. Wading in a shallow bay, as it does in search of food, the bird is visible for long distances.

An adult is about 54 inches long and has a wing-spread of 83 inches. The plumage is pure white, while its bill is yellow, except for a dab of green at the tip. The legs, also, are yellow with a suggestion of green in front.

According to the late Arthur H. Howell, well-known Fish and Wildlife Service naturalist who was an authority on the birds of Florida, it was at one time not unusual to see 40 or 50 of these giant birds in the shallow waters of the Bay of Florida, "standing belly deep in the water, motionless as statues, awaiting the approach of their prey."

When not seeking food, these exceedingly shy birds roost in mangrove trees. It is in these same trees that the great white heron raises its young.

Unlike others of the heron tribe, the great white heron does not congregate in large rookeries to nest. Usually from 2 to 8 pairs will concentrate near one spot, and the nearest colony will be a half mile or more distant.

Though the nesting season covers practically the entire year, most of the eggs are laid during December and January. Nests are shallow, flat platforms of sticks, about 3 feet in diameter, and are usually placed 10 to 20 feet above ground in mangrove trees. Usually the clutches contain 3 or 4 eggs.

- C -